

Field Report – **La Posa Long-Term Visitor Area**

■ 1.0 Summary

The La Posa Long-Term Visitor Area (LTVA) was created to accommodate the needs of long-term, winter visitors while protecting the surrounding desert environment. In addition to the tens of thousands of long-term campers hosted by the area every season, the Recreation Management Area also accommodates numerous short-term visitors to the region, many of whom come for events held in the town of Quartzsite. Transportation issues revolve around circulation between the various camping areas and the town, and crossing the barrier posed by Interstate 10. The area has experienced congestion on routes leading to and through the town, parking shortages, and conflicts between motorized and non-motorized traffic.

Two types of alternative transportation strategies have been proposed for this site. One would be a shuttle service connecting different camping areas with the town of Quartzsite. Such a shuttle service would likely only offer modest benefits in terms of traffic reduction and would require a significant operating subsidy. A more promising alternative involves construction of a pedestrian and bicycle trail system to provide an alternative means of circulation. While again only offering modest traffic relief, trails would also reduce the potential for accidents involving pedestrians, bicyclists, and motorized traffic. Both alternative transportation strategies would enhance the visitor experience by offering an alternative to congestion and inadequate parking.

■ 2.0 Background

2.1 Location

The La Posa Recreation Management Area (RMA) is located in southwest Arizona near the California border and includes parts of Yuma and La Paz counties. Entrances to the Long-Term Visitor Area (LTVA), which lies within the RMA, are approximately two miles south of Interstate 10 and the town of Quartzsite. The LTVA is about 20 miles northeast of the town of Yuma and is adjacent to the Kofa and Imperial National Wildlife Refuges. Figure 1 illustrates the general location of the La Posa RMA.

2.2 Administration and Classification

The La Posa RMA is a unit of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), administered by the Yuma field office. The RMA is predominantly under federal ownership administered by the BLM, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the Department of Defense, Yuma Proving Ground. Scattered parcels in the RMA are under Arizona State Trust Lands and private ownership, but they comprise a small part of the total area.

Created in 1983 to meet the needs of winter visitors and to protect the local desert from over-use, the La Posa LTVA lies within the RMA. The LTVA is located two miles south of Quartzsite off of U.S. Highway 95 and is managed by the BLM Yuma field office. The LTVA is also a fee demonstration pilot program site.

While a number of permanent staff are based at the Yuma field office, the La Posa LTVA is typically overseen by only three to four seasonal park rangers. The BLM relies heavily on a cadre of volunteers to monitor the campgrounds, maintain a presence at contact stations, provide information, and educate visitors on rules and regulations. Volunteer campground hosts receive a \$50 per month stipend in addition to a free camping permit and utility hookups. In return, volunteer hosts must serve for at least three months.

2.3 Physical Description

The La Posa RMA covers 798,700 acres of desert ecosystem and habitat. The site is characterized by mild winters, hot summers and low precipitation and contains numerous sites of historical and archeological significance. The 11,400-acre LTVA is flat and sparsely vegetated with plants such as creosote bush, Palo Verde trees, Mesquite trees and various species of cacti. Camping is mostly restricted to a 121,500-acre zone around the town of Quartzsite, either in the La Posa LTVA or one of five designated 14-day camping areas. Facilities provided at the campgrounds include vault toilets, a dry dump station, a dump station with water, water stations, trash service, and some paved or improved roads. Outside the zone where camping is allowed only in designated areas, camping is allowed on BLM land only within 100 feet of designated roads and trails, unless traveling by non-motorized means. There are also some day-use areas in the vicinity of Quartzsite. Figure 2 shows the various camping designations in the RMA.

During the summer season, there is a 14-day time limit on camping stays in the LTVA and camping costs \$5.00 per day. During the winter season (between September 15 and April 15), longer-term camping is permitted and a different fee structure applies. Visitors who intend to stay for more than 14 days must acquire a permit, which costs \$20 per week or \$100 for seven months. Camping remains free at the five 14-day camping areas. While collection of the long-term camping fees is largely successful, some campers evade the fee by overstaying the limit at the 14-day sites. Enforcement of the time limit is difficult since the BLM lacks the staff to closely monitor individual campers.

Rather than designating fixed camp sites within the LTVA, the BLM has set regulations that stipulate a 15-foot clearance between vehicles. According to BLM staff, visitors are quite adept at squeezing in so that the campgrounds are never officially “full”.

2.4 Mission and Goals of the Site

Goals used in developing the La Posa Interdisciplinary Management Plan include the following:

- Provide for recreational opportunities on BLM-administered lands through a mix of BLM, other public agency, and privately operated recreation facilities;
- Manage land use to maintain diversity of the vegetation;
- Encourage community development on land identified for disposal;
- Maintain a wide range of OHV [Off-Highway Vehicle] opportunities while eliminating the uncontrolled spread of OHV use into current roadless areas and avoiding negative impacts of OHV use on natural and cultural resources of the planning area; and
- Manage cultural resources for information, public values, and conservation.

Specific objectives of the Plan were to:

- Maintain semi-primitive and long-term camping opportunities while reducing adverse impacts;
- Increase recreational opportunities in the management area and respond to public informational needs;
- Promote tourism and private business opportunities in the management area through partnerships; and
- Evaluate desert wildlife habitat conditions in cooperation with the Arizona Fish and Game Department.

2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

The La Posa LTVA is a popular winter destination for visitors with motor homes, recreational vehicles, and trailers. The winter visitors are typically retirees and often stay for several months. The typical visitor is on a fixed income and is looking for an inexpensive place to stay over the winter although some higher-income individuals do come. Visitors often return year after year and develop intense social networks. Another striking characteristic of the visitor population is their relative lack of hurry. In contrast to the younger visitor on a limited vacation schedule, the typical LTVA visitor plans his visit over the course of weeks or months. Thus, the typical visitor is not as distressed at the prospect of spending an entire day to make a trip to town as might be expected. Visitors to the LTVA are predominantly from the United States, although some visitors do come to the site from Canada, Germany, and Great Britain.

The high season for visitation is mid-September through mid-April, with the peak occurring December through February. Visitor levels usually spike after the Thanksgiving holidays. Visitation is higher on weekends than weekdays.

The highest historical visitation levels to the LTVA were observed during the fiscal year 1996-1997, when 11,239 long-term camping permits were sold. Since decals for up to three vehicles are issued with each long-term camping permit, the total number of vehicles associated with long-term visitation was even greater. The number of people associated with this number of permits has been estimated at over 22,500, which represents a more than tenfold increase over the off-season population of Quartzsite, which is about 2,000. During the peak visitation periods, the LTVA campgrounds are essentially small cities with their own water supplies, sewage facilities, and law enforcement personnel.

During this time period (1996-1997), an estimated 218,280 people visited the RMA. However, the La Paz County sheriff's offices have estimated that over a million people visit the Quartzsite area during the peak months.

■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues, and Concerns

3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues And Concerns

Existing Facilities

Transportation issues at the LTVA are affected by its proximity to the town of Quartzsite and the layout of existing roads. The long-term campgrounds are located approximately one and one-half miles south of town along U.S. Highway 95. Interstate 10 (I-10) lies between the campgrounds and town, presenting a barrier to circulation. There are three bridges crossing I-10 in the vicinity of Quartzsite, including the one carrying Highway 95.

According to the site's Management Plan, the BLM plans to develop two scenic byways in the Area to highlight the Area's unique cultural resources, desert vegetation, and scenery. The Plomosa Road 14-day camping area lies to either side of one of these byways, Plomosa Road, just off of Highway 95 to the north of Quartzite. The interpretive exhibits along this scenic byway are slated to be expanded.

Transportation Issues and Concerns

During the peak visitation months, the area experiences extreme traffic congestion, both on routes leading to and from town and within the town itself. In past seasons, traffic has backed up from the town all the way to the entrances of the long-term campgrounds (Exhibit 1). The main artery running through town is also often gridlocked as the long-term campers proceed en masse to check their mail at the post office, shop, and attend special events (Exhibit 2). Conditions are worst during the morning hours through noon with the afternoon peak being somewhat less pronounced. Circulation in the area is also not helped by the fact that the Route 95 bridge does not offer access to I-10. However,

visitors have reportedly adapted to these conditions and simply expect to face long delays. According to the *La Posa Interdisciplinary Management Plan Environmental Assessment*, periods of non-compliance with Arizona Department of Environmental Quality air quality standards have occurred in the vicinity of Quartzsite.

Circulation within the campgrounds takes place on mostly unpaved gravel roads and passageways (Exhibit 3). Dust has been something of a problem and in response the BLM laid a chip-seal over one of the more heavily used routes leading to a water station and dumpsite. In many locations, long-term visitors have staked out the boundaries of drive-ways and circulation routes with rocks and have even constructed their own speed bumps. Congestion within the campgrounds has also been a problem with lines from the dump and water stations extending up to a half mile at peak periods.

In addition, there are a few “back roads” which provide alternative means of access to the most heavily used areas. An unpaved county road, Old Yuma Road runs near the western boundary of the LTVA, connecting to the I-10 frontage road. In addition, a fair number of drivers use the Tyson Wash¹ to drive towards town.

During peak periods, the lack of parking in or near the town is also a problem. During fiscal year 1996, almost 85,000 of the Management Area’s 218,000 visitors used public land for parking and event access. While entrepreneurial townspeople set up paid parking areas on their property, visitors still often park illegally on nearby public or private land. In addition, some visitors are simply averse to paying for parking and will go to considerable trouble to avoid doing so.

Despite the emphasis on motorized transportation in the area, visitors do walk and bicycle between the campgrounds and town. During peak visitor months, the weather is typically favorable to walking and bicycling. Bicyclists and pedestrians must currently make do with a very narrow shoulder along Highway 95 and its bridge over the Interstate. While the vehicle speeds are generally low due to congestion, this situation poses a safety issue and accidents do occur.

3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues, and Concerns

The town of Quartzsite has a service-based economy. Important sources of income come from private RV parks, rental of spaces to swap-meet and rock show vendors, rental of private land for parking spaces, restaurant sales, and services such as vehicle towing and repair. To a certain extent the current transportation situation is economically beneficial to the town, in that the more time visitors spend there, the greater the likelihood that they will spend money. The town’s economy is also very seasonal, with taxes paid between October and March accounting for about 70 percent of annual receipts.

¹ A wash is essentially a dry riverbed which is periodically subject to flash floods.

The BLM wishes to support the town's economic development. For example, the BLM has permitted the establishment of a road across public lands to the site of a future airport. In addition, the BLM permits free day use of the LTVA, including the parking of vehicles, as a means of supporting Quartzsite businesses.

Efforts to improve or promote alternative transportation could benefit the local economy. For example, a privately operated shuttle service could generate income for local businesses. On the other hand, any actions that decreased the need for parking on private land could reduce local income.

3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns

As mentioned in the Management Plan, the LTVA was created to accommodate winter visitors to the area while protecting the surrounding natural resources. By limiting overnight camping to certain areas, damage to the environment is contained and visitors can be more closely monitored. In return for being limited to certain areas, overnight visitors are provided with facilities such as water and waste dumps.

Most long-term visitors abide by the rules and regulations. A small minority continues to leave behind trash, illegally cut firewood, and other disallowed activities, resulting in continued impacts to the natural environment. However, the impacts are much more confined to the LTVA than was the case previously when camping was allowed throughout the management area.

Another key issue concerns the cultural resources near the LTVA. The La Posa Interdisciplinary Management Plan Environmental Assessment lists 22 cultural resource sites within the Management Area. The sites vary in terms of proximity and accessibility to the LTVA. Some of the more common types of sites are campsites, sleeping circles, rock alignments, and trails. Site types that are relatively rare include earth figures or intaglios (large figures, designs, and pathways drawn into the desert ground), ceremonial sites, and rock pictographs (Exhibits 4-5). Historic sites include abandoned mining sites, wagon roads, and a military rock alignment.

While the existence of the sites is generally known to those familiar with the area, they have not been highly publicized as visitor attractions. Some of the archeological sites, in particular, are very fragile and could be destroyed by higher levels of visitation. The BLM has not yet found the resources to protect the sites (e.g., by stationing a ranger at them or building protective structures). Thus, there is sometimes a conflict between enriching the visitor experience and protecting cultural resources. Most of the archeological and historical sites are difficult to find, reachable only via unpaved roads or by entirely off-road routes across the desert. Turnoffs and directions to the sites are typically not well marked.

3.4 Recreational Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Visitors to the LTVA can enjoy a number of activities including cultural site visitation, wildlife observation, hiking and rock hounding. Another popular visitor activity is

attending special events and shopping in the nearby town of Quartzsite. Among the regularly scheduled events are rock and mineral shows, antique shows, and classic car shows. Shopping opportunities include a variety of swap meets, flea markets, and specialized vendors.

In addition, the Yuma field office sponsors a series of educational programs every season including outdoor slide presentations on topics such as archeology, Native American culture, and wildlife. Guided field trips to archeological sites have also been given. Volunteer staff and others give some of the educational programs by BLM staff.

3.5 Planning and Coordination with Other Jurisdictions

The key planning and management document for the site is the *La Posa Interdisciplinary Management Plan and Environmental Assessment*, which was published in 1997. This document lists the other agencies that participated in preparation of the *Plan*, including the Arizona Game and Fish Department, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge, the U.S. Army Yuma Proving Ground, and the town of Quartzsite, Arizona.

Also relevant to transportation issues and planning in the LTVA are projects sponsored by the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT). The ADOT five-year plan includes projects to widen the easternmost and central bridges over Interstate 10, including the Route 95 bridge, to provide better accommodation of pedestrian traffic. ADOT also plans to widen the main thoroughfare in Quartzsite by the year 2004.

■ 4.0 Assessment of Need

4.1 Magnitude of Need

The La Posa LTVA and the nearby town of Quartzsite experience high levels of congestion during the peak season. As previously mentioned, traffic queues can stretch for over a mile and at times, gridlock prevails. In addition, Highway 95 does carry significant heavy-duty truck traffic, much of which is heading to or from Mexico. Some of these trucks must get caught in traffic and would benefit from reduced congestion. Finally, there are the safety issues posed by the proximity of pedestrians and bicycles to the mostly large vehicles on the roads.

This conditions could be mitigated through use of alternative transportation strategies. A shuttle connecting the campgrounds with the town would have a moderate impact on levels of congestion, providing visitors with an alternative to driving and finding a place to park.

An expanded system of trails and bicycle paths could also help reduce levels of congestion and would have the additional benefit of improving pedestrian and bicycle safety. Trails could also provide another recreational opportunity for those visitors who prefer to hike or bicycle on developed trails.

4.2 Feasible Alternatives

There are two basic types of alternative transportation strategies that are applicable to the La Posa LTVA. One involves construction of pedestrian and bicycle trails in order to encourage non-motorized travel among campgrounds and the town. The other strategy would involve providing shuttle service among the campgrounds and town. By providing improved access to parking opportunities on public lands, both of these strategies could help relieve parking problems in the town as well as relieving traffic congestion. These strategies should be considered for implementation in concert with transportation demand management (TDM) options.

Pedestrian and Bicycle Trails

One of the management actions in the La Posa Management Plan is to develop a trail system in the main washes for non-motorized traffic. These trails would connect the La Posa LTVA and selected camping areas to the town of Quartzite. Because of the possibility of flash flooding in the washes, the trails will need to have appropriate warning signs. Trails constructed in washes might also be wiped out periodically by the flooding.

While not mentioned in the Management Plan, trails could also be constructed alongside Highway 95 between campground locations and the town. This option would involve widening the highway to increase the shoulder width or constructing a separate trail on public land a short distance from the paved highway. Trail use would also be supported by the proposed construction of pedestrian walkways along I-10 overpasses at Highway 95 and the exit east of Quartzsite.

As noted in the Environmental Assessment for the Management Plan, “Developing a trail system in washes in the Quartzsite area would reduce the chance of pedestrian-vehicle accidents along U.S. Highway 95. Traffic congestion would also be relieved because more people would be likely to walk or bicycle along the trails to and from Quartzsite instead of driving along the highway.” While certainly not all visitors would choose to walk or bicycle over driving, the presence of pedestrian and bicycle trails could have a modest impact on traffic congestion. Moreover, trails would provide the visitor with a more enjoyable and recreational alternative to sitting in traffic while increasing safety.

Shuttle Systems

The possibility of developing a shuttle system, most likely in partnership with town of Quartzsite, has been mentioned by other planning documents² and BLM staff. A shuttle, probably consisting of a van, minibus, or other small vehicle, could provide service among camping areas and to various locations in the town.

While the idea is intriguing, a shuttle service at this site would face significant challenges. The majority of the visitors are on fixed incomes and are extremely price-sensitive. There-

² Source of photocopied document, text used by Tracy?

fore, any shuttle service offered would have to be free to the passengers, requiring a 100 percent operating subsidy. In addition, the visitor population at La Posa is of a very independent nature and will be difficult to draw away from their personal vehicles. Any shuttle service would have to offer something akin to “door-to-door” service at the campgrounds. Also note that until or unless key roadway facilities are expanded, shuttle vehicles would have to either travel off-road, travel on roadway shoulders (where possible), or potentially face the same levels of congestion as private vehicles.

A shuttle service using golf carts was reportedly tried by a private entrepreneur a few years back and was not continued, presumably because of low demand or profitability. While this fact is not encouraging, shuttles might still have a role to play at this site, were the supporting funding available. Benefits would include support of the local economy, presuming a local business is contracted to provide the service, along with moderately reduced traffic congestion. In addition, some portion of the visitor population would undoubtedly enjoy having this option available to them. A shuttle service could be seen as another visitor service provided by BLM in return for increased regulation of camping.

TDM Strategies

Also worth of consideration would be strategies reducing the number of vehicles brought to the site by each visitor party. It is not uncommon for a visitor party to bring three vehicles to the LTVA (a motor home towing a second vehicle, plus a third vehicle driven by another person in the party). As previously mentioned, up to three decals are currently issued with each long-term visitation permit. If additional fees were charged for each additional vehicle, these would help reduce the total number of vehicles brought to the LTVA and encourage visitors to use alternative transportation modes for circulation within the area. The additional fees collected could help fund any alternative transportation systems implemented such as shuttles, or pedestrian and bicycle paths.

Another TDM strategy would be to raise the fee for the long-term permit by some amount but include two free passes for a shuttle service. Visitors might be more likely to use the alternative transportation system if they felt they had already paid for it. Again, additional fees collected could help fund the alternative transportation system.

■ **5.0 Bibliography**

5.1 Documents Reviewed

U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management. *La Posa Interdisciplinary Management Plan*. July 1997.

5.2 Persons Interviewed:

Bill Alexander, Park Ranger

Mark Lowans, Recreation Planner

Exhibit 1. Backup of Vehicles on Highway 95

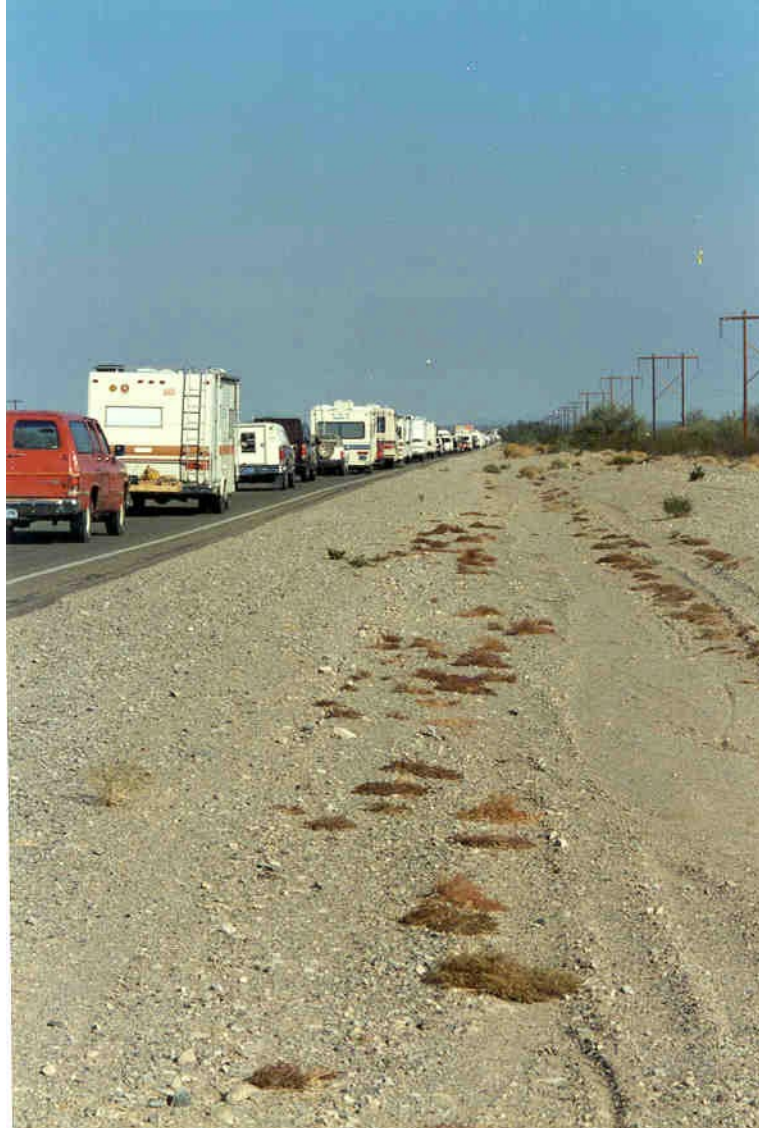


Exhibit 2. View of Central Boulevard and Highway 95 in Downtown Quartzsite



Exhibit 3. Speed Limit Posted in Camping Area



Exhibit 4. Interpretive Sign at Intaglio Site

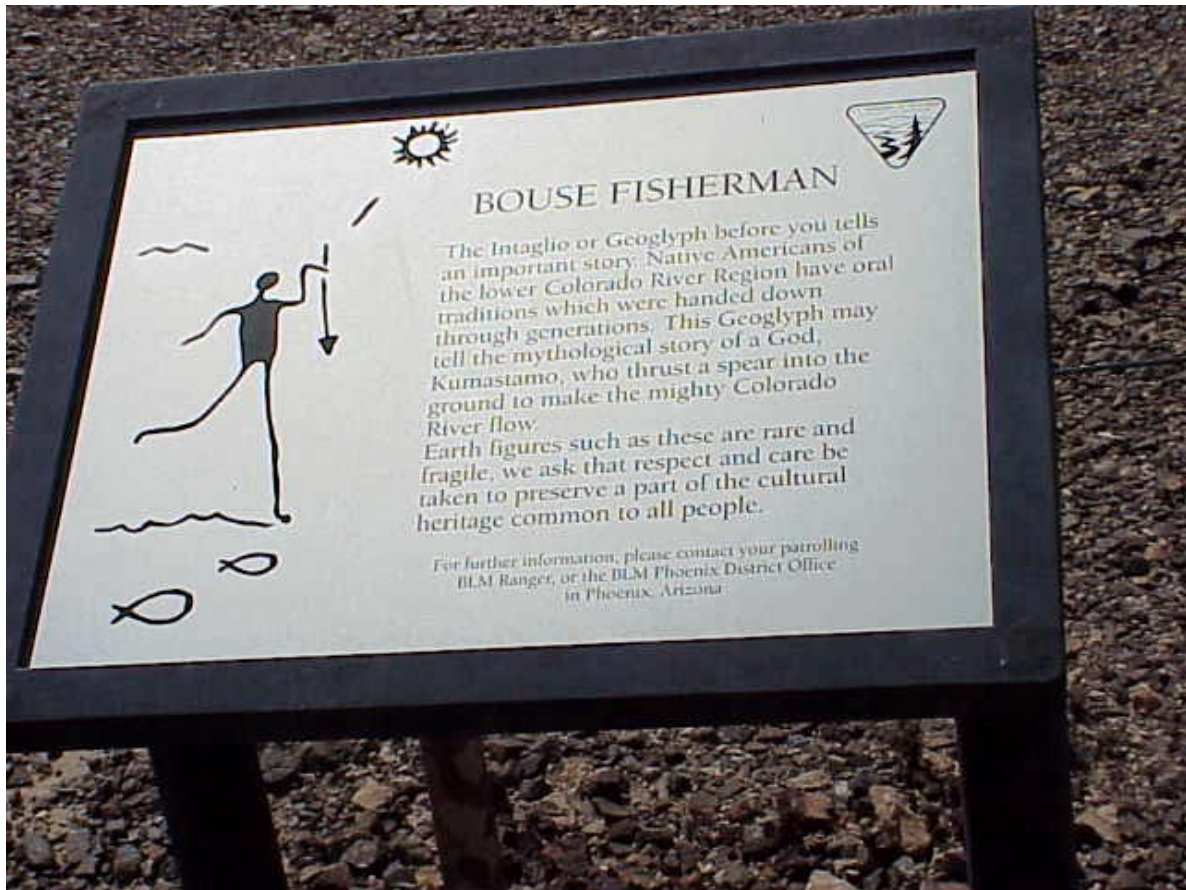


Exhibit 5. Example of Pictographs

